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OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT
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ON CIVILITY

THANK YOU, PRESIDENT GEE. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, IT WAS WITH A DISTINCT SENSE OF HONOR THAT I RECEIVED PRESIDENT GEE'S INVITATION TO SPEAK AT THIS IMPRESSIVE COMMENCEMENT. I FELT ALL THE MORE HONORED SINCE, BEFORE THE INVITATION WAS CONFIRMED, I HAD TO PASS A RIGOROUS EXAMINATION ON A NUMBER OF FRONTS, AN EXAMINATION OBVIOUSLY DEVISED BY DR. GEE TO ASCERTAIN WHETHER I WAS, IN FACT, QUALIFIED TO BE YOUR COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER. I DID NOT QUESTION THE PROPRIETY OF THIS PROCESS, ALTHOUGH I CONFESS TO HAVING EXPERIENCED SOME SURPRISE WHEN I FOUND THAT IT EXTENDED EVEN TO MY THEOLOGICAL BELIEFS. FORTUNATELY, AS A THIRD GENERATION OHIO STATER, I DISPLAYED NO HESITATION WHEN THIS ISSUE AROSE. I WAS ABLE TO LOOK DR. GEE IN THE EYE AND DECLARE: "YES SIR, I DO INDEED BELIEVE THAT GOD IS A BUCKEYE!"

IT IS A TRUISM THAT NO ONE EVER REMEMBERS IN LATER YEARS WHAT THE SPEAKER AT A COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY SAID. GENERATIONS OF EARNEST SPEAKERS HAVE LABORED OVER THEIR REMARKS, RESIGNEDLY UNDERSTANDING THAT FEW IN THE AUDIENCE WILL CONCENTRATE ON LISTENING TO THEIR SPEECHES AND NONE, IN YEARS TO COME, WILL RECALL EVEN THE SUBJECT OF THE TALK LET ALONE ITS PARTICULARS.

A VETERAN COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER ONCE TOLD ME HIS FORMULA: MAKE IT FUNNY. MAKE IT ANODYNE AND MAKE IT SHORT! I INTEND TO FOLLOW THE THIRD ELEMENT IN HIS PRESCRIPTION, BUT I AM GOING TO IGNORE THE OTHER TWO. MY ATTITUDE IS PROBABLY A LITTLE SELFISH. YOU GRADUATES ARE HERE TO RECEIVE WELL-EARNED UNIVERSITY DEGREES AND YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILIES ARE HERE TO SEE THE DEED DONE AND CELEBRATE WITH YOU AFTER THE CEREMONY. YOU ALL WOULD LIKELY SETTLE FOR A FEW WELL-TOLD STORIES AND A CHEERY AND PAINLESS EXPRESSION OF GOOD WISHES FOR THE FUTURE AS MY CONTRIBUTION TO THESE EXERCISES. I, HOWEVER, HAVE A HEAVEN-SENT, NEVER-TO-RECUR OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS A CONVOCATION OF OUR GREAT UNIVERSITY AND SPEAK ABOUT A MATTER WITH WHICH I AM PROFOUNDLY CONCERNED, A MATTER WHICH I BELIEVE EACH OF YOU NEEDS TO THINK ABOUT AS YOU INAUGURATE YOUR CAREERS AND PREPARE TO LIVE OUT THE BALANCE OF YOUR LIVES. THE TEMPTATION IS TOO GREAT. I HOPE SOME OF YOU, AT LEAST, WILL LISTEN TO WHAT I SAY AND GIVE THOUGHT TO IT HEREAFTER.

MY SUBJECT IS CIVILITY. JUST AFTER THE END OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR, A DISTINGUISHED ENGLISH JUDGE, LORD MOULTON, MADE A THOUGHTFUL ADDRESS TO THE AUTHORS' CLUB IN LONDON ON THE SUBJECT OF LAW AND MANNERS. HE OBSERVED THAT, IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY, THERE IS A SPECTRUM OF ACTIONS BY INDIVIDUALS WHICH SOCIETY REGARDS IN DIFFERENT WAYS. AT ONE END OF THE

SPECTRUM, THERE IS THE REALM OF LAW WHICH CONSTRAINS INDIVIDUAL ACTION ACCORDING TO THE MORAL AND STATUTORY STANDARDS WHICH SOCIETY HAS DECREED. ONE CANNOT COMMIT MURDER, OR VIOLATE THE ANTI-TRUST LAWS OR OPERATE ONE'S BUSINESS IN VIOLATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS. TO CITE JUST THREE DISPARATE EXAMPLES. AT THE OTHER END OF THE SPECTRUM IS THE REALM OF ABSOLUTE FREEDOM. AS CITIZENS OF A DEMOCRATIC STATE, WE HAVE A WIDE AREA OF DISCRETION IN WHICH WE CAN ACT AS WE PLEASE. WE MAY, FOR INSTANCE, TRAVEL WHERE WE WANT, LIVE WHERE WE WILL AND ASSOCIATE WITH THOSE WE WISH. BETWEEN THESE TWO REALMS, HOWEVER, MOULTON SAW AN INTERMEDIATE ZONE WHICH HE, BEING AN EARLY 20TH CENTURY ENGLISHMAN, DESIGNATED THE DOMAIN OF GOOD FORM OR THE DOMAIN OF MANNERS. IT WAS HIS VIEW, WHICH I SHARE, THAT IN THIS INTERMEDIATE ZONE, ALL OF US ARE, OR SHOULD BE, LIMITED IN OUR FREEDOM OF ACTION BY A HOST OF ETHICAL ATTITUDES, SOCIAL CONVENTIONS AND BEHAVIORAL STANDARDS WHICH, WHILE UNENFORCEABLE, REPRESENT A CODE OF CONDUCT WHICH MANY GENERATIONS HAVE FOUND NECESSARY TO THE MAINTENANCE OF A COHESIVE SOCIAL FABRIC. OUR ABILITY TO REMAIN A GREAT AND VIBRANT DEMOCRACY IS DEPENDENT ON OUR ABILITY TO OBEY THESE SELF-IMPOSED RESTRICTIONS ON OUR FREEDOM OF ACTION. OTHERWISE, WE WILL EITHER SEE THE SIGNIFICANT EXTENSION OF PRESCRIPTIVE LAWS, A SITUATION LIKELY TO LEAD TO A

TYRANNICAL GOVERNMENT AND A TIMOROUS PEOPLE; OR WE WILL EXPERIENCE AN ANARCHISTIC EXPANSION OF FREE WILL WHICH WILL LEAD TO THE CENTRIFUGAL DESTRUCTION OF OUR SOCIAL ORDER. IT IS OUR COLLECTIVE OBSERVANCE OF THESE UNENFORCEABLE, SELF-IMPOSED SOCIAL PRACTICES THAT I CALL CIVILITY.

WHILE MOULTON WAS AN ENGLISHMAN, HIS REMARKS SOME SEVENTY YEARS AGO APPLIED PERFECTLY TO OUR COUNTRY AS WELL AS HIS. MUCH CHANGE HAS OCCURRED IN BOTH COUNTRIES OVER THE INTERVENING YEARS, AND SOME OF THOSE CHANGES HAVE INVOLVED AN EROSION OF CIVILITY WHICH MOULTON WOULD FIND DISTRESSING AND WHICH I BELIEVE REPRESENT A VERY REAL THREAT TO OUR LONG-TERM SURVIVAL AS A GREAT AND DEMOCRATIC NATION.

AT THE HEART OF CIVILITY IS A WILLINGNESS ON THE PART OF THE INDIVIDUAL TO CURB HIS FREEDOM OF ACTION IN THE INTERESTS OF THE COMMUNITY, TO SUBLIMATE HIS INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS OR THOSE OF A GROUP WITH WHICH HE IS CLOSELY ASSOCIATED TO THE GREATER GOOD OF SOCIETY AS A WHOLE. THE YEARS SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR HAVE WITNESSED A PROGRESSIVE ATROPHY IN THIS WILLINGNESS. WE HAVE EXPERIENCED THE "ME" GENERATION AND HAVE SEEN AN INCREASING GLORIFICATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL, EVEN OF THE INDIVIDUAL WHOSE BEHAVIOR IS TRANSCENDENTLY, ABERRANT AND IDIOSYNCRATIC.

DENNIS RODMAN MAY CHOOSE TO LIVE HIS LIFE BY BEING "AS BAD AS HE WANTS

TO BE," BUT IS POPULARIZING THE BAD REALLY THAT GOOD FOR OUR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN? WE HAVE ALSO WITNESSED A GROWING FRAGMENTATION IN OUR SOCIAL PRIORITIES, IN WHICH THE PARTICULAR AGENDAS OF SUB-GROUPS ARE GIVEN PRIMACY OVER WHAT AN EARLIER GENERATION WOULD HAVE CALLED THE GOOD OF SOCIETY AS A WHOLE. THESE TENDENCIES IN OUR SOCIETY HAVE LED TO A SERIOUS LOSS OF SOCIAL COHESION.

I BELIEVE MANY OF THE PERCEIVED ILLS OR WEAKNESSES OF OUR SOCIETY TODAY CAN BE TRACED TO THE BREAKDOWN OF OUR CIVILITY. OUR POLITICS ARE INCREASINGLY FRACTURED BY VOTERS WHO HAVE A SINGLE ISSUE THAT OVERRIDES ALL OTHER POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LEADS TO JUDGING CANDIDATES BY SOCIALLY UNHEALTHY LITMUS TESTS. OUR SOCIETY IS NOTORIOUSLY -- AND INCREASINGLY -- LITIGIOUS BECAUSE FEW OF US CAN ACCEPT ANY TRESPASS WHATEVER UPON OUR UNBRIDLED FREEDOM OF ACTION, AND MOST OF US BELIEVE THAT WHEN WE INDIVIDUALLY ARE HARMED OR AGGRIEVED, THE BLAME MUST BE LAID UPON OTHER INDIVIDUALS BY THE STANDARDS OF PRESCRIPTIVE LAW. WE ARE LOSING THE ABILITY TO RESOLVE OUR DIFFERENCES WITH CIVILITY AND WITHIN AN OVERALL SOCIAL CONTEXT.

EVEN OUR EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURE IS PLAGUED BY THIS TREND. OUR PUBLIC SYSTEM OF ELEMENTARY, SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION WAS PERHAPS THE

GREATEST SINGLE SOCIAL INSTITUTION THAT LED TO THE CREATION OF A STRONG AND
HOMOGENEOUS AMERICA. IT FUNCTIONED FOR GENERATIONS LARGELY ON THE BASIS OF
SOCIAL CONVENTION. THE STATUTES BOUNDING ITS PERIMETERS WERE FEW.
TEACHERS, STUDENTS, PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE WORKED TOGETHER,
BY WELL-UNDERSTOOD, SELF-IMPOSED METHODS TO MAKE IT ALL WORK. TODAY'S
WIDELY PERCEIVED BREAKDOWN IN OUR PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM IS, I BELIEVE,
LARGELY DUE TO A CAUSATIVE BREAKDOWN IN THOSE CONVENTIONS. THE
UNWILLINGNESS OF STUDENTS TO SUSTAIN DISCIPLINE; THE WILLINGNESS OF PARENTS
TO SUPPORT THEIR PECCANT CHILDREN WHEN THEIR CONDUCT IS QUESTIONED; THE
TENDENCY OF SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS TO FORCE THE SCHOOLS TO DO OR REFRAIN
FROM DOING THINGS THAT THESE GROUPS ADVOCATE OR DEPLORE; THE PRESSURE TO
SPLINTER CURRICULA IN ORDER TO REFLECT THE VALUES OF VARIOUS SUB-GROUPS -- ALL
THESE, IN MY VIEW, REFLECT A LACK OF CIVILITY, AN UNWILLINGNESS TO OBSERVE THE
STANDARDS OF BEHAVIOR AND THE CONVENTIONS WHICH ALLOW SOCIETY AS A WHOLE
TO SURVIVE AND PROSPER.

IT IS MY OBSERVATION THAT WE IN AMERICA ARE BEGINNING TO ACCEPT A LACK
OF CIVILITY AS BEING THE NORM THROUGHOUT OUR SOCIETY, WHERE ALL TOO OFTEN
GUNS NOT REASON SETTLE DISPUTES; WHERE POPULAR MUSIC AND MOVIES PROSPER BY
GLORIFYING VIOLENCE, SHOWING CONTEMPT FOR AUTHORITY AND DEBASING WOMEN;

**AND WHERE A BASEBALL PLAYER IS JUST AS LIKELY TO SPIT IN THE FACE OF AN UMPIRE
AS HE IS TO ABIDE BY THE RULES OF THE GAME.**

**THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE ABOUT MY AGE CAN, IF YOU WILL, REFLECT ON YOUR
LIFE EXPERIENCE AND CONSIDER HOW THE EROSION OF CIVILITY HAS AFFECTED YOUR
LIFE IN A VARIETY OF WAYS. NOT SO LONG AGO, EVERY MOTORIST IN AMERICA KNEW
NOT ONLY THE TRAFFIC LAWS BUT ALSO THE UNWRITTEN "RULES OF THE ROAD" WHICH
PROMPTED EVERY DRIVER TO DEFER TO OTHER DRIVERS IN THE INTERESTS OF SAFETY
AND COURTESY. NOW WE HAVE DAILY "ROAD RAGE" INCIDENTS IN WHICH ENRAGED
DRIVERS, CONSCIOUS OF SOME REAL OR IMAGINED SLIGHT BY ANOTHER DRIVER, RESORT
TO DANGEROUS SPEEDING AND PASSING, TAILGATING AND, IN EXTREME CASES, TO
MAIMING AND MANSLAUGHTER.**

**IN AN EARLIER DAY, THERE WAS AN EXTENSIVE, UNWRITTEN AND SELF-IMPOSED
CODE OF CONDUCT REGARDING INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR WHILE IN CROWDS. ONE DID NOT
PUSH OR SHOVE, BREAK INTO A QUEUE, OR PUSH ASIDE LITTLE OLD LADIES. GO TO A
BALLGAME OR VISIT A MALL ON A SATURDAY AND SEE HOW ALL THAT HAS CHANGED!
EVEN THE LITTLE OLD LADIES NOW DISPLAY THE MOST VICIOUS AND SELF-CENTERED
TACTICS IN ORDER TO DO EXACTLY WHAT THEY WANT WHEN THEY WISH TO DO IT, AND
DEVIL TAKE THE HINDMOST.**

OR ATTEND A TOWN MEETING OR A ZONING HEARING. ROBERTS' RULES OF ORDER

WERE A REDUCED-TO-WRITING VERSION OF A SET OF CONVENTIONAL RULES WHICH EVOLVED IN SOCIETY AS A MEANS TO CONDUCTING MEETINGS IN AN ORDERLY AND CIVIL MANNER. POOR CAPTAIN ROBERTS WOULD BE DISMAYED TO SEE MOST PUBLIC MEETINGS TODAY CONDUCTED, IF THAT'S THE APPROPRIATE VERB, IN A MANNER QUITE AT ODDS WITH HIS RULES. TODAY IT IS HE WHO SHOUTS FIRST AND LOUDEST WHO GAINS THE FLOOR!

AND THEN, AS I HAVE ALREADY OBSERVED, THERE IS THE SCHOOL. AT AN EARLIER DAY, IT WAS AN OLD SAW THAT ANY PUNISHMENT ONE RECEIVED FOR AN INFRACTION AT SCHOOL WAS AS NOTHING TO THE PUNISHMENT ONE WOULD RECEIVE AT HOME ONCE THAT INFRACTION WAS REPORTED. PARENTS BACKED TEACHERS. NOW PARENTS SUE TEACHERS -- OR SOMETIMES SHOOT THEM.

PUBLIC POLICY FORMATION HAS ALSO BEEN A VICTIM OF THE DECLINE IN CIVILITY. ONCE FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY WAS A CUSTOMARY VALUE OF MOST OFFICIALS AND PUBLIC SERVANTS. TODAY POLITICIANS HAVE EITHER ABANDONED THAT VALUE ALTOGETHER OR ARE URGING PASSAGE OF A PRESCRIPTIVE LAW, LIKE THE BALANCED BUDGET AMENDMENT, TO ENFORCE THAT VALUE. IN EFFECT THEY ARE SAYING, I WON'T VOLUNTARILY DO WHAT IS RIGHT FOR SOCIETY SO PLEASE FORCE ME TO DO SO.

MANY COMMENCEMENT SPEECHES ATTEMPT TO ADVISE THE GRADUATES HOW THEY MIGHT TAKE MAXIMUM ADVANTAGE OF THEIR OPPORTUNITIES IN LIFE, HOW THEY

CAN INDIVIDUALLY LEAD HAPPIER, MORE VALUABLE, MORE FULFILLING LIVES. MY THEME IS QUITE DIFFERENT. JOHN KENNEDY SAID, FAMOUSLY: "ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR YOU, ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY." MY MESSAGE IS CONGRUENT: ASK NOT WHAT YOUR RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS ARE IN SOCIETY, ASK RATHER WHAT DUTIES AND OBLIGATIONS YOU HAVE TOWARD SOCIETY. FOCUS NOT ON YOUR RIGHTS BUT ON YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES. AS GRADUATES OF A GREAT UNIVERSITY YOU WILL HAVE PLENTY OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR REWARDING AND FULFILLING CAREERS. AS YOU PURSUE THOSE CAREERS, HOWEVER, PLEASE KEEP IN MIND THE LARGER SOCIAL CONTEXT IN WHICH YOU WILL BE OPERATING.

ALWAYS BE CIVIL. IT IS REALLY QUITE EASY. TREAT OTHERS WITH RESPECT AND OBSERVE THE CONVENTIONS OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR THAT WE CALL GOOD MANNERS. ALWAYS REFLECT ON THE EFFECT YOUR INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS ARE LIKELY TO HAVE ON OTHERS AND ON SOCIETY AS A WHOLE. BE PREPARED TO SACRIFICE SOME OF YOUR OR YOUR GROUP'S CHERISHED GOALS IF YOU PERCEIVE THAT THEIR CONTINUED ADVOCACY IS HAVING AN ADVERSE EFFECT ON OUR SOCIAL FABRIC. ACCEPT FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN ACTIONS AND INSIST THAT THOSE AROUND YOU -- INCLUDING YOUR CHILDREN -- DO LIKEWISE. DEVELOP A SENSE OF DUTY TO YOUR COMMUNITY AND YOUR FELLOW CITIZENS. REMEMBER THE IMPORTANT SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS THAT HAVE HELPED SHAPE YOUR FUTURE -- LIKE YOUR ALMA MATER -- AND REMEMBER YOU HAVE A

DUTY TO PROTECT, PRESERVE AND AMPLIFY THOSE INSTITUTIONS.

ALL OF US RECEIVE SUPPORT AND AID FROM VARIOUS SOURCES AS WE GROW TO ADULTHOOD, ARE EDUCATED AND SET OUT ON OUR CAREERS. ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT IT IS YOUR SACRED, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO REPAY THAT SUPPORT AND AID IN KIND, BY PROVIDING THOSE SAME ELEMENTS TO THE GENERATIONS COMING BEHIND YOU.

AND CONSIDER SMALL THINGS AS WELL AS LARGE. LANGUAGE AND CIVILITY ARE TWO OF THE PRINCIPAL ELEMENTS OF OUR SOCIAL ORDER, AND LIKE LANGUAGE, CIVILITY MUST BE LEARNED AT AN EARLY AGE. AS YOU RAISE YOUR FAMILIES, INSTILL IN YOUR CHILDREN A SENSE OF DISCIPLINE AND A FEELING OF RESPONSIBILITY. TEACH THEM GOOD MANNERS. ENCOURAGE THEM TO BE KIND AND THOUGHTFUL TO OTHERS. IF OUR CIVILITY IS FRAYED, WE MAY PATCH IT UP IN OUR OWN GENERATION BUT WE CAN BEST RESTORE IT, IN THE LONG RUN, BY INCULCATING ITS COMPONENTS IN THE REARING OF OUR CHILDREN.

WE HAVE MUCH TO GAIN BY STRIVING AS INDIVIDUALS OR AS GROUPS TO REGAIN A LARGE MEASURE OF CIVILITY. NO GREAT NATION HAS LONG SURVIVED A MASSIVE REGIME OF INTRUSIVE PRESCRIPTIVE LAW. NO GREAT SOCIETY WAS EVER CREATED WITHOUT THE WILLINGNESS OF ITS MEMBERS TO SUBLIMATE THEMSELVES TO A REASONABLE DEGREE IN THE INTERESTS OF SOCIAL COHESION. WE CAN ALL AGREE THAT

OUR SOCIETY TODAY HAS MANY PROBLEMS AND WEAKNESSES. I SUGGEST THAT WE CANNOT ADDRESS THESE, FOR THE MOST PART, BY EITHER LEGISLATION OR AN EXPANSION OF INDIVIDUAL PERMISSIVENESS. ONLY A RESUMPTION OF CIVILITY WITHIN OUR COUNTRY SHOWS PROMISE OF PROVIDING RELIEF FROM OUR SOCIAL ILLS. I URGE EACH OF YOU TO REFLECT ON WHAT I HAVE SAID AND TO TRY TO PRACTICE IN YOUR LIVES AN INCREASED LEVEL OF CIVILITY. REMEMBER AS WELL THAT CIVILITY LIKE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS MUST BE LEARNED EARLY IN LIFE AND MUST BE REFLECTED FIRST IN LITTLE THINGS BEFORE IT CAN GO ON TO BE REFLECTED IN THE GREAT SOCIAL ISSUES OF THE DAY.

John D. Ong